

# Fairfax County Board assesses storm impact, urges regional task force to study 911 failure

*By Fredrick Kunkle*

The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors spent much of Tuesday's first regular meeting since [the violent June 29 storm](#) assessing damage and the county's response, focusing particularly on the communications breakdowns and attempts by county staff to keep the public informed despite widespread power outages.

Chairman Sharon S. Bulova (D) urged the formation of a regional task force to examine the [breakdown of its 911 emergency communications systems](#) for more than three days following the storm. She plans to propose at Wednesday's meeting of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments that the regional body delve into the [blackout of Verizon's 911 emergency telephone service](#) and find ways to avoid another one. Although the failure mostly affected Northern Virginia, she said the region's governments should examine the outage because Verizon also serves the District and Maryland.

Supervisor John W. Foust (D-Dranesville), whose constituents in Great Falls and McLean were among the hardest hit, was also the most critical of the county's handling of the crisis. He said county emergency staff did a poor job coordinating with supervisors who were out and about in their neighborhoods and hearing from constituents about the most pressing needs. He described his frustration trying to reach Dominion Power officials or senior county staff for help restoring power for a 100-unit assisted-living center and setting up a cooling center in McLean.

"Because we worked hard doesn't mean we worked smart," Foust said. He also faulted Dominion Power for not having sufficient resources in place to handle the outages.

Other supervisors said the county's Office of Public Affairs had been too dependent on means of communication that relied on electric power, such as the county's Web site and emergency center blog, and should have been more nimble in finding ways to keep the public informed despite the power outage. Others suggested bolstering the ranks of volunteers who would be prepared to help out during an emergency. Several criticized the buck-passing that sometimes occurred between utility companies and tree removal companies that hindered the removal of fallen trees and suggested that the county should find a way to override concerns about clearing debris from private property during emergencies.

County Executive Edward L. Long Jr. said staff performed admirably in light of a communications interruption that was beyond their control and the record-breaking [heat wave](#) that followed, but he also acknowledged lapses.

"I think 'Team Fairfax' can do better," Long said.

Long, who is compiling a report on the county's response to the storm, said a preliminary assessment suggests that the county's facilities sustained only minimal damage, which he estimated cost no more than \$200,000. But the county itself was walloped.

In a day-by-day review of the storm, Long said the number of 911 calls spiked 415 percent after the storm hit Friday night on June 29. More than 120 intersections were without traffic signals, 40 of the county's 63 wastewater pumping stations lost utility service, and more than 100 homes sustained damage from falling trees, including 15 that required inspections afterward to determine whether they were still habitable. Utilities reported that more than 400,000 customers were without power.

Communications glitches complicated the response. Without 911 service, people had to call non-emergency numbers or even walk to fire or police stations to contact authorities, who then

dispatched units using the county's radio system. There were no fatalities linked to the outage, county officials said.

In the future, Supervisor Catherine M. Hudgins (D-Hunter Mill) said, the county should improve its coordination of emergency response for its most vulnerable populations, such as senior citizens. She also suggested strengthening ties to the faith community, which opened churches and other centers of worship to people who needed relief. Supervisor John C. Cook (R-Braddock) said the county should have been quicker to deploy portable, independently powered road signs to communicate with the public.

The brightest element of the aftermath was that many residents stepped up to help.

"It was sort of old-fashioned in a way: neighbors helping neighbors, neighbors helping out as best they could," Long said. "That was one of the team-building effects with a disaster such as this."

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